

SYMPOSIUM

WED. May 15, 6:30 PM

at The Cooper Union, Hewitt Building #207,
Third Avenue at 7th street.

\$6 General Admission
\$3 Storefront members, students, seniors

Adriaan Geuze

landscape architect, Rotterdam, Holland

Linda Pollak

architect, New York and Cambridge, MA with a focus on
urban outdoor spaces.

Anne Pasternak

Executive Director of Creative Time, Inc., sponsoring
artists' projects in the urban environment.

Danny Tisdale

artist involved with community planning, legislation and
activists in New York, working to involve artists in
decision-making and City planning.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING URBAN CENTERS
AND THEIR PUBLIC SPACES IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY?
AS THE WORLD POPULATION HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY
MOBILE, WITH WAVES OF IMMIGRATION SHAPING
NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE CITIES BEYOND,
ACCOMMODATING CONTINUALLY SHIFTING CULTURAL
PREFERENCES AND CONSTRUCTIONS DEMANDS A SIMILAR
FLUIDITY. IN AN ERA WHEN MEDIA IMAGES CAN WIELD
INFLUENCE BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THE
HEADQUARTERS, CITY HALL OR TOWN SQUARE THAT
SENDS THEM, HOW CAN WE CONSTRUCT, FACILITATE AND
ENCOURAGE PUBLIC SPACES THAT ARE FLEXIBLE ENOUGH
TO ANSWER THE NEEDS OF THE CITY TODAY AND
TOMORROW? HOW HAVE THE QUESTIONS AFFECTING THE
RELATIONSHIP OF NATURE TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
OR THE ROLE OF ART IN PUBLIC BEEN ANSWERED,
IGNORED OR EXACERBATED BY PAST ACTION? HOW CAN
WE BEST ACT, DESIGN, BUILD, THINK PRO-ACTIVELY?

DISCUSSION

Friday, May 17 at 7pm

Bart Lootsma

at Storefront for Art and Architecture

\$6 General Admission
\$3 Storefront members, students, seniors

Dutch architectural critic Bart Lootsma will discuss
Contemporary Dutch Landscape/Architecture,
particularly related to the exhibition of West 8/Adriaan
Geuze's work.

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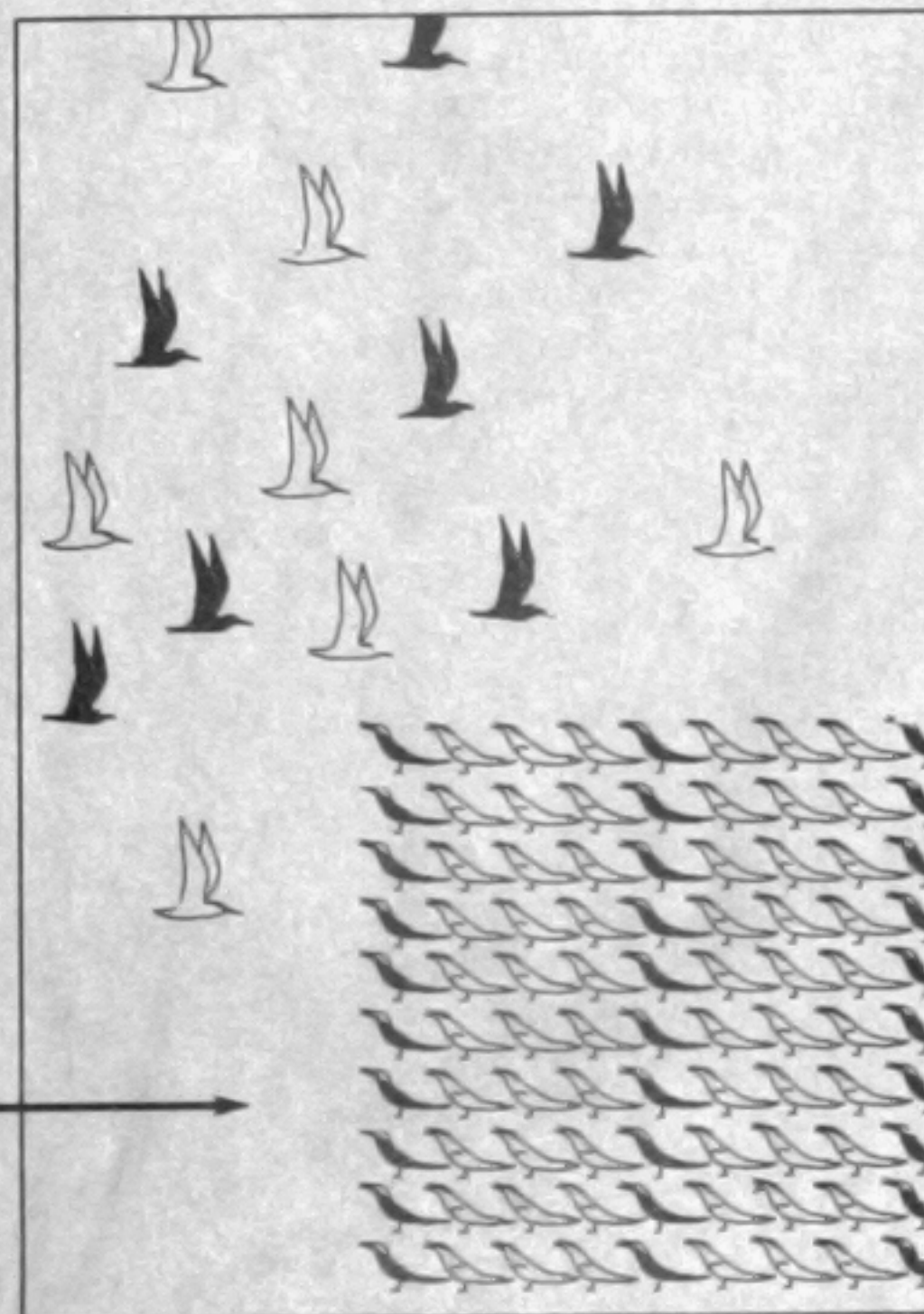
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Landscape Design for Eastern Scheldt Storm Surge
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VERTICAL LANDSCAPE, GREEN MANHATTANISM

WE HEARD ABOUT THIS VERTICAL CITY.
WE'VE SEEN THE IMAGES OF ITS
SKYSCRAPERS AND EXPECTED, TO THIS
SUBLIME STATEMENT OF TOWERING
AMBITION, ASTONISHING PIECES OF
VERTICAL LANDSCAPES—PARKS AS
AMBITIOUS AS ROCKEFELLER CENTER,
OR THE CHRYSLER AND THE EMPIRE
STATE BUILDINGS.

WHEN WE FIRST DISCOVERED CENTRAL
PARK, WE SAW IT AS THE PERFECT
VOID, A ONE HUNDRED FIFTY BLOCK-
SIZE, SHARPLY ENCLOSED LANDSCAPE
THAT PROVOKES THE MANHATTAN
SKYLINE AND DRAINS THE CITY OF ITS
DESIRE FOR BODY EXPOSURE.

WE WE NOTED THE IBM'S BAMBOO-
GARDEN, TRUMP TOWER'S ATRIUM AND
WATERFALLS, AND THE RCA
BUILDING'S SEASONLESS ROOF-GREEN.
AS INTERESTING ATTEMPTS TO DEAL
WITH THE ILLUSION OF BABYLON'S
HANGING GARDENS, MANHATTAN
"GREEN" TURN OUT TO BE AN UGLY,
PATHETIC FLOWER-POT-GREEN. EVEN
WORSE, MANHATTAN IS AN URBAN
JUNGLE, BUT GREEN IS NO PART OF IT.
URBAN NATURE BORES US WITH ITS
LACK OF AMBITION, SILENTLY GROWING
IN LEFT-OVER SPACES WITHOUT THE
HYPNOTIZING COLOR, THE DRAMATIC
CHANGE OF SEASONS AND THE
OVERWHELMING BOUNTY
CHARACTERISTIC OF NATURE.

YET STILL, WE KEEP OUR INFANT
DREAMS OF SKYGARDENS AND
VERTICAL PARKS.

WE ENVISION THE
FOLLOWING FOR
MANHATTAN:

Sky-garden ses back Mies
The Flat iron (sequoia) twin
An inverted 24-hour nature
Ivy unlimited

This exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of
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Adriaan Geuze
Edzo Bindels
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Henri Bordin
Joost de Natris
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Cyrus Brent Clark
Catja Edens

WEST 8

May 16 - June 29 1996

opening reception: may, 16. 6-8pm
gallery hours: tues-sat 11-6pm

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Designing For the New Communities



VAMS Terminal, Prix de Rome, 1990

It is often so that innovations within a cultural discipline originate with people who come from outside that discipline. Such is the case with West 8, an office for landscape architecture which in addition to the garden, park and landscape commissions normally assigned such practices, is engaged in designing urban space and drawing up urban plans. There is nothing strange about this, and nothing new either. Landscape architects in the Netherlands have been intensively occupied with designing urban extensions, and building whole new cities and villages in the polders at least since the Second World War. What is new, though, is West 8's concept of landscape as not just being the counter-form of the city but the entire urban-rural constellation to its users. Adrian Geuze puts it: "the new city is an well-aired metropolis of villages, urban centers, suburbs, industrial areas, docks, airfields, woods, lakes, beaches, reserves and the monocultures of hi-tech farming."

While West 8 has taken the stage as a young new office, the Dutch landscape as the reference and source of urban changes has dramatically changed. The landscape of this country has rapidly become urbanized since the World War II, and such urbanization will continue in the years to come. More than seventy per cent of the Dutch built environment was built since 1945, and the population density in the Benelux countries is now approaching that of Japan. So the task now is no longer designing on the virgin tabula rasa of polderland sites or in the seemingly unbounded countryside that surrounded the traditional city centers, but now in the residual margins between city and green areas, industrial and abandoned sites. It is a landscape, until recently called as periphery, which has now become so extended to make the old city cores peripheral. The Dutch practice of regional and national planning—a system of decentralization—is thus brought face to face with its own limitations, although this state of affairs has long been kept hidden. Even today the rational layout of the Dutch landscape never fails to impact on those flying in to Schiphol Airport from abroad, which is placed to serve many cities and not just one. But already in the Sixties, many vague and less desirable activities were being concentrated provisionally at the city edges. In the beginning, with their numbers being limited, the situation was tolerated. But since then these amorphous fringe areas between cities have been gradually closing ranks to form a patchwork of enclaves, accommodating the most disparate of functions today.

Adrian Geuze was fascinated by the surrealistic nature of this landscape from early on. In 1987, for instance, he wrote about the cemetery as an urban fringe phenomenon on the same footing in society as vegetable gardens, breaker's yards and gypsy encampments, and about the analogy between graves and landed vegetable beds, mortal remains and wrecks of cars, corpses and social outcasts. "However, the ultimate concentrations of what Geuze describes is found on the Maasvlakte, near Rotterdam. Here on this gigantic offshore dockland area an impressive assemblage of orphan has taken up residence: a twenty-five meter high artificial dune land to hide the oil drums from the beach at the Hook, a uranium ore terminal, a dozen experimental wind turbines, a tidal gully with port dredging depot, a chemical waste dump, a container terminal, a detonation zone for explosives, even a trout farm. The most bizarre program, however, is the World Disaster Centre, an area where take blocks of flats, an oil platform, a train, trucks, a refinery, storage tanks and such like are built and set on fire with natural gas. Firemen and disaster teams from all over the world come to train here twenty-four hours a day. But that's not all. On the days off, hordes of people stream to the Maasvlakte to engage in new, adventurous and sometimes dangerous forms of recreation, that the designers of parks and leisure areas never even dreamed of and consequently made no place for them in their designs. They see the expanse of sand as a place to practice sledding or scrambling, the dredging depot as a hang glide runway, the wall of blocks as fossilized rocks, the saltwater sand reclamation pit as a place for deep sea diving. And then he is forgetting the Maasvlakte as the venue for the largest house party ever held. The last few years have seen the mechanisms that facilitated the large-scale infrastructure works, land reclamation and urban planning of the postwar reconstruction, grind to a halt. Moreover, the contours of a second and far more radical cultural villa—face are taking shape. The ambition here in the Netherlands is to erect some 800,000 houses by the year 2005, most of them in the Randstad—conurbation defined by Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht. These houses are to be built almost entirely without

government subsidy which has not been the case until now. That means that these new overspill areas, guided by the demands of the housing market, will consist largely of low rise development, thereby turning the traditional relation of city to country in large sectors of the Netherlands forever upside down. The pressure of the market is already so great that it is even beginning to percolate through the fine planning mesh of the sanctified 'Green heart' of woods and lakes that are at the center of Randstad. The notion that its citizens will finally determine how to run their lives has splintered local administration—witness the division of the large councils into sub-municipalities—while the forming of larger administrative units in anticipation of a European Market of competing regions has been burning for more than fifty years. Hence the horrendous difficulty of drawing up large-scale plans that can transcend municipal boundaries and stand up to the increasing internationalization for which the multinationals and multi-media networks are largely responsible this fraction."

West 8's strength is that they take the themes of this situation and make them the substance of their work. For this, the office may be compared to Rem Koolhaas's Office of Metropolitan Architecture. Both are concerned with, as Koolhaas once said, 'maintaining and processing the tradition of so-called 'functionalism'. Functionalism effectively engaged in a campaign to promote the programmatic thought that architecture could directly influence the contents of a culture rooted in density, technology and social instability. The design methods of both West 8 and OMA employ a method of 'systematic idealizing, a spontaneous overestimation of what is already there, a theoretical bombardment whose retroactive conceptual and ideological intervention extend to even the mediocre.'"

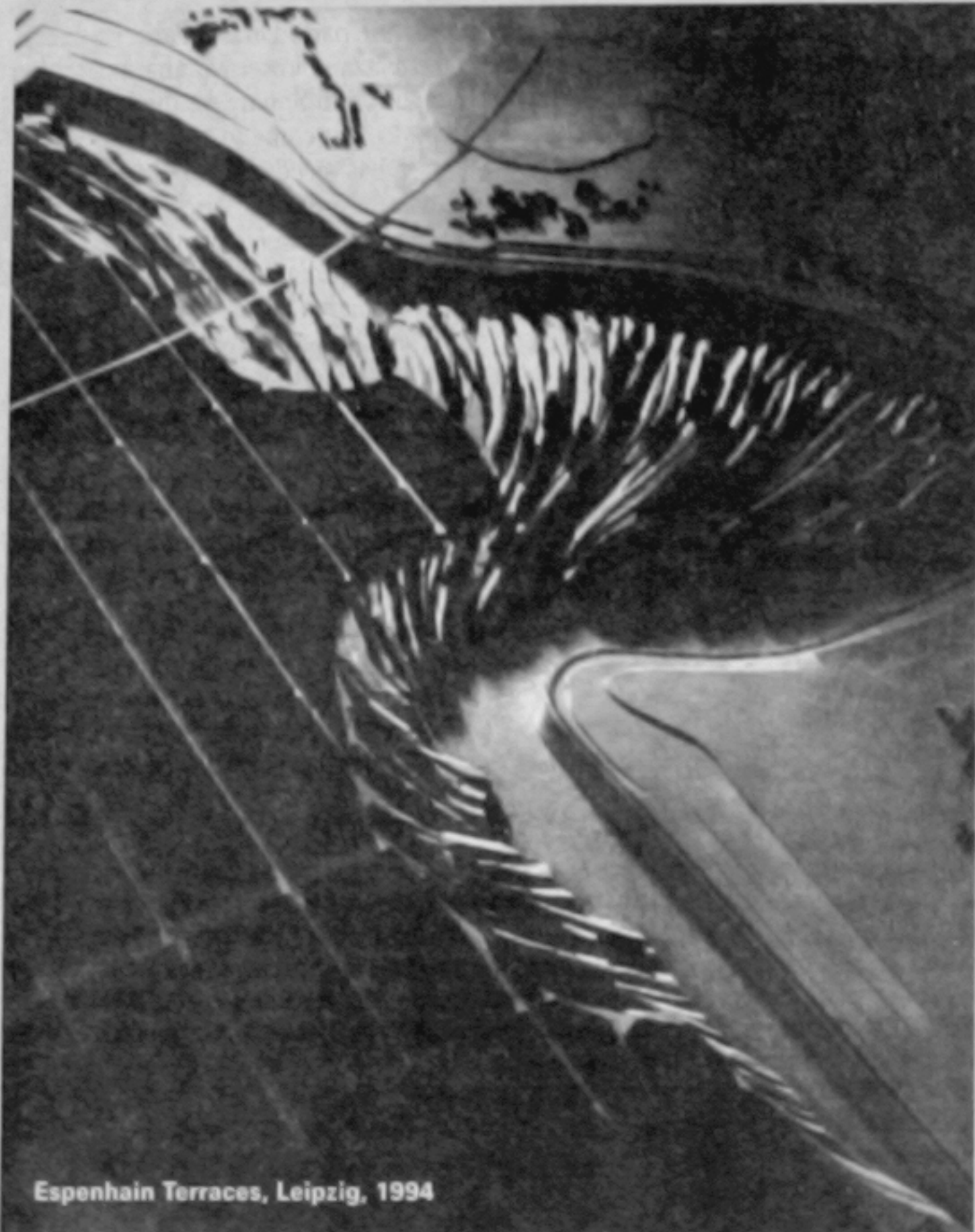
The clearest and most provocative example of this attitude is undoubtedly the project 'In Holland stands a house' which West 8 realized in the Netherlands Architecture Institute. The project was one in a series of exhibitions in which young designers were asked to show their source of inspiration. The organizers had presumably expected West 8 to follow the PoMo tradition and exhibit a poetic assemblage of highlights from the history of landscape architecture or other



such 'exalted' matters. The practice chose instead to show the absolute cross-section of housing stock in a systematic photo documentary of 120 suburban residential estates from all over the Netherlands. There was, in addition, a gigantic model of the 800,000 single-family dwellings that the Netherlands is to build in the next ten years. The result was a revelation. After years of architectural discourse centered on projects well away from the means, it was possible for the first time to get a glimpse of how the vast majority of the Dutch actually live. One of the most remarkable conclusions was that, despite the efforts of architects to make something special, and of occupants to emphasize their individual identity, their sum was simply swamped by the sheer massiveness of the affair. The primary impression made by this exhibition was the uniformity of this 'landscape'—an impression only strengthened by the model of 800,000 houses filling out the entire colonnade of the Institute. However arranged, the fact that they were of equal height left them each time as a kind of steppe, a leveled landscape in which patterns might be made out, yet dominated ultimately by monotony.

This monotony has been a tricky issue for architects and planners at least since the end of the Sixties, one they have yet to put aside. Given West 8's manner of presentation, it should now be apparent that architects and planners are hardly likely to be the ones to find a solution to this problem. They are by nature all too inclined to split up the issues into chunks and treat them independently, when the cohesion of the landscape as a whole is at stake. The power of several of West 8's larger urban projects lies in the fact that the cohesion of the landscape is resolutely drawn into the design. We see, for instance, the Alexanderpolder even dreamed of and consequently made no place for them in their designs. They see the expanse of sand as a place to practice sledding or scrambling, the dredging depot as a hang glide runway, the wall of blocks as fossilized rocks, the saltwater sand reclamation pit as a place for deep sea diving. And then he is forgetting the Maasvlakte as the venue for the largest house party ever held. The last few years have seen the mechanisms that facilitated the large-scale infrastructure works, land reclamation and urban planning of the postwar reconstruction, grind to a halt. Moreover, the contours of a second and far more radical cultural villa—face are taking shape. The ambition here in the Netherlands is to erect some 800,000 houses by the year 2005, most of them in the Randstad—conurbation defined by Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht. These houses are to be built almost entirely without

The need to view the urbanization process at a larger scale

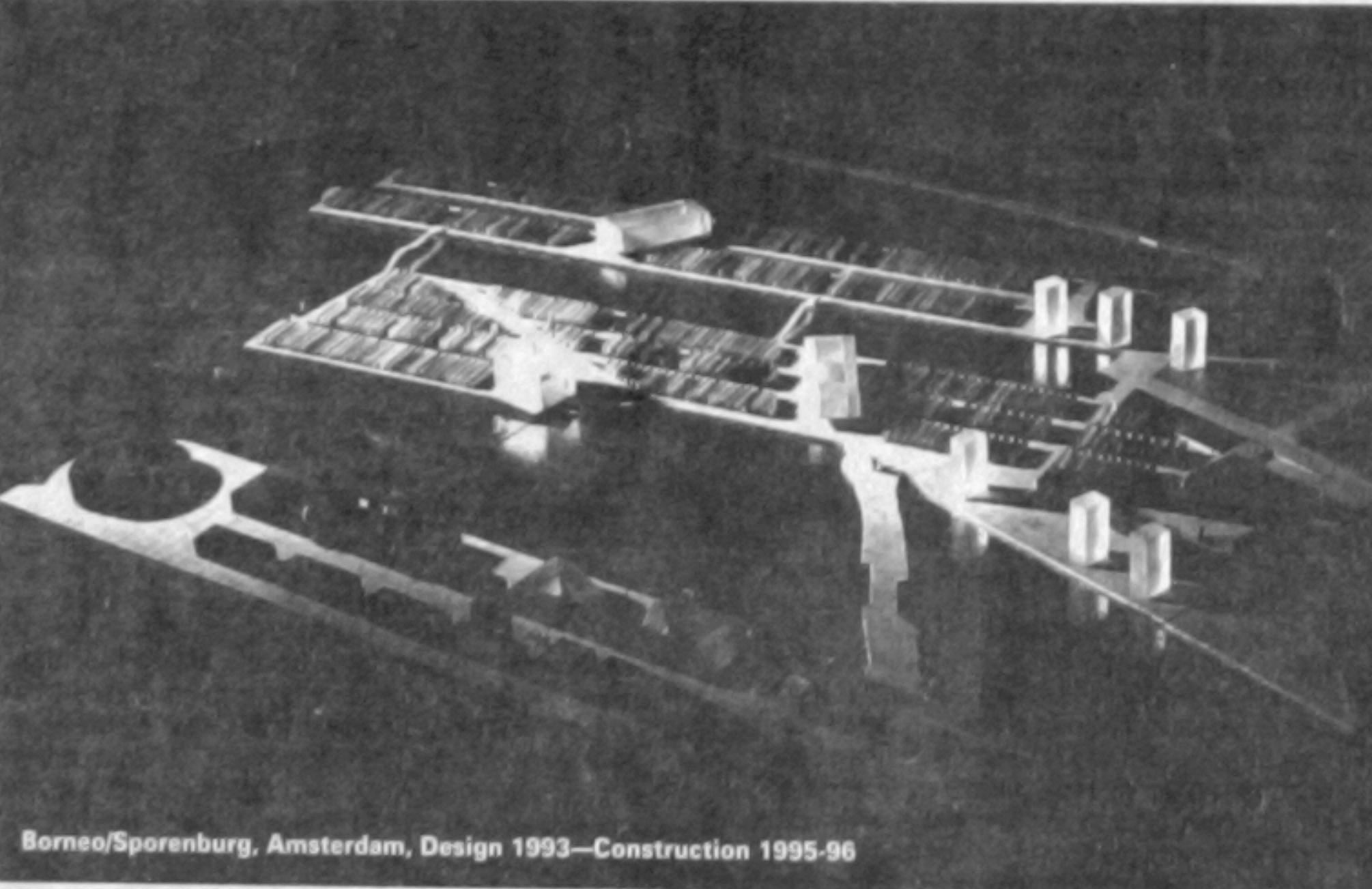


Espenhain Terraces, Leipzig, 1994

comes from relatively new phenomena: the increase in mobility and the emergence of new media networks. In his introduction to 'In Holland stands a house', Adrian Geuze remarks that the appeal of new houses to the urbanite is their lack of pretension. True, it is a mini-universe containing bedroom, kitchen, record player and TV, perhaps supplemented by a nursery, an attic and a small storage cellar—most of all, though, it is 'the chosen anonymous home base for his existence.'

In earlier texts, Geuze examines the way the active urbanite lives and, in doing so, dissects a number of fundamental misconceptions: The urbanite is not the pitiful victim of the city who needs looking after and protecting in a discreet, green environment. The urbanite has shown himself to be a self-assured, exploratory individual, highly mobile, and has the technology at his disposal as well as access to numerous media. The environment doesn't need to adapt to the supposed wishes of the urbanite. It is he who adapts to his environment. For him the house is no longer a personal universe. The urbanite is constantly changing guise and environment, taking his leisure on the Maasvlakte and in the Alps, hanging around in dark alleys, tearing through the landscape, sleeping and working at different places, with families and friends that don't live on his street.

So the house and the street are only limited issues from where the urbanite draws his identity, the same holds as much for the neighborhood and the traditional city center as for the things which give him the sense of community. It is ironic that the close of a century is characterized by the most staggering changes in the history of man, and the majority of writings and projects for the city remain haunted by the ghost of the historically obsolete European center-city. The misconception seems that if we return to more or less traditional concepts of city, then the old sense of community would return. The American urbanist Lars Lerup proposes we rethink the city. Like Geuze, he sees the city as an expansive landscape, two of the terms he introduces for it are *stim* and *dross*. *Stim* derives from stimulation as used by William Gibson in his novel 'Mona Lisa Overdrive', from *Stimme* (voice) and *Stimmung* (ambiance). *Dross* is a waste product or impurities formed on the surface of molten metal during smelting, but it is also used in the meaning of worthless stuff as opposed to valuables, *dreg*. It is a brilliant metaphor for the city or metropolis as we see it



Borneo/Sporenburg, Amsterdam, Design 1993—Construction 1995-96

developing worldwide: the idea of life as a bubbling hot metal with a skin which it breaks through at times. Below there is the original landscape of the media, which we might regard as steam and vapor rising from the molten mass. Needless to say, the skyline of the Weena boulevard in the background. A long bench transforms the square into the ultimate theater. This square can be the stage for the most diverse and marvelous scenes extending far into the night, illuminated as required by lamps that can be adjusted by the public. These lamps can temporarily transmute the public space into private property, exposed though its users are to constant observation by others.

But in the midst of all this dross are the *stims*, a vital importance to the inhabitants of cities. In the *stims* of Houston, the city Lerup describes, these are the places that are kept cool by a hi-tech infrastructure of air conditioning and refrigeration. These are the places where people start socializing. It can be a bar or a restaurant, a garage with a particular clientele or a shopping mall. It can just as easily be an art party in a chic house, or

places used for the forms of recreation observed by Adrian Geuze on the Maasvlakte. But when the restaurant closes, or the party ends, the *stims* return to being dross. The Metropolis is bombarded by a million *stims* that flicker on and off during the city's rhythmic cycles. These *stims* steam and stir, oscillate and goad, yet each specific 'stimme', or voice, reverberates throughout the Metropolis in a most selective manner, the art party visited above draws a very narrow audience just as the zydeco dance halls in East Houston. Both are essential, vital elements of the full-fledged Metropolis. The *Stimmung*, or ambiance, projected by each *Stim* is fully understood and fully experienced by the insiders only.

So the city is not simply the same thing repeated over and over again. The enormous increase in individual mobility and the influence exerted by media networks has made the metropolis a complex ecology in which countless smaller and larger communities coexist and interface with varying compounds. These communities are no longer determined by constant physical proximity. In the story 'Onze flat' (Our Flat), Adrian Geuze describes the dispersal of such community and the emergence of many tribes, as the basis of history of the Maaskant apartment building in Rotterdam. Communities are shaped more and more these days by active, conscious choice and temporal proximity. This extends beyond the persistent, generalized readings of so-called 'multi-cultural society' which, no matter how friendly the wording, invariably boils down to an invasion by foreigners. The new mode of forming communities is a phenomenon that transcends borders, and in that sense can be said to develop 'from within.' These days there are even self-styled 'Virtual Communities' on Internet, constituted according to levels of interest ranging from child care to pop groups and from politics to electronic sex, these have no need of place or space, merely an anonymous server.

What does this all mean for the public space, the very place for experiencing and celebrating one's sense of community? First it means that there will be less public realm than before, and that will be consist largely of circulation spaces, whose design is contingent on highways and civil codes. For the specialized public spaces, such as urban squares and plazas, fine form-giving or cultural lining with an art work is not enough for them to be effective. It is the quantity and intensity of the *stim*, and its offering to us personally that determines to the exclusion of everything else, that will make us go into the city. Whether that place is public, semi-public like bars, restaurant, discos and shopping centers, we are assuming ever greater importance to the city. Semi-public networks that have emerged in the larger cities that can be used in much the same way as one zaps from channel to channel on TV, intuitively and, with a short interest span, in a constant agitated search for new kicks. 'It's cool or it sucks,' in the jargon of MTV's 'Beavis and Butthead.'

West 8's response to this situation is that the more specific public realm are conceived as a program linked to local energy, an energy issuing from the exotic culture defined by the users themselves. Their behavior can hardly preprogrammed by formal and cultural means, and imposed from above, as they are founded on anarchy, exploration and self-expression. West 8's designs are stages for this anarchy and self-expression. They form the minimal means to an arena that makes its users aware that it is special. New public space will manipulate its users to the extent that they will immediately be aware of their behavior, and that they can no longer revert to preprogrammed acts. Geuze writes: This space transforms anonymity into exhibitionism, spectators into actors. It is not a matter of design, of the beauty of dimensions, nor materials and colors, but of the sensation of a

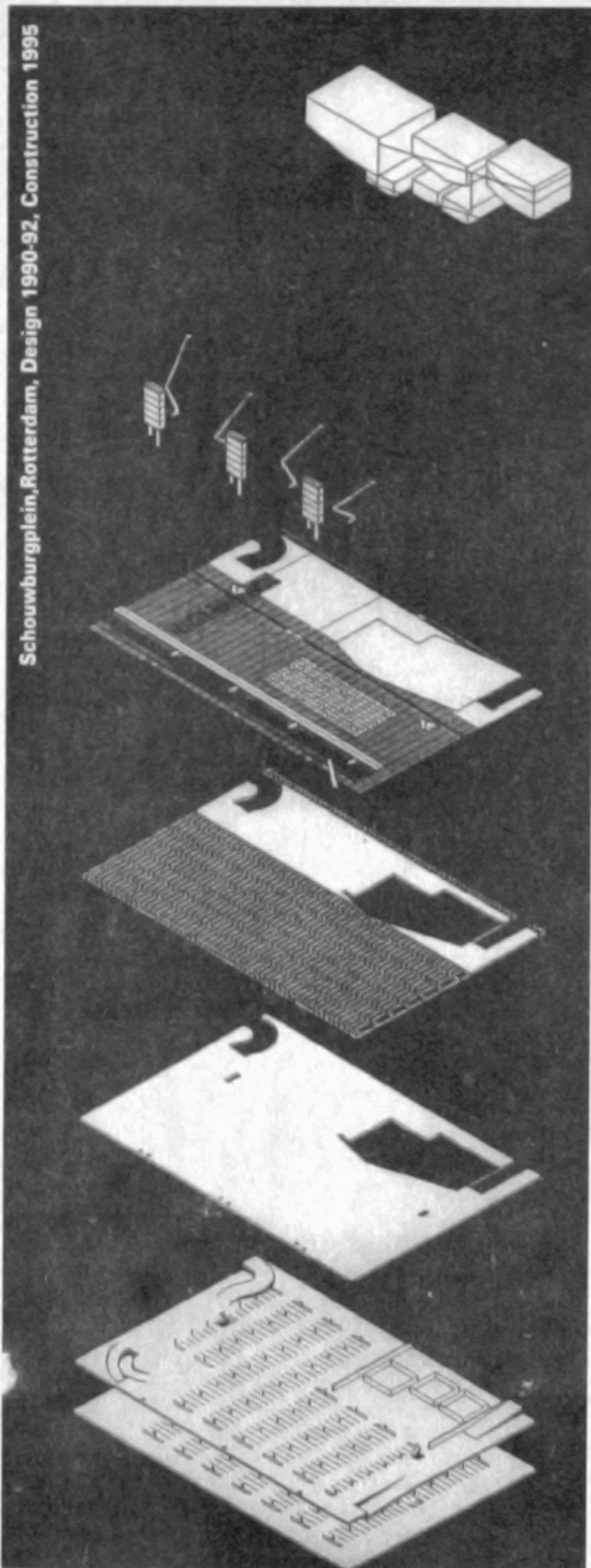
of the space between and behind their investigations, there gradually emerges the picture of a society made of free and active agents who do their own organizing and expression, in new communities. The designs of West 8 not only marry well with this development, the new concept can give these designs a more effective and critical impact at this new level.

Bart Lootsma
Originally published in "Adriaan Geuze" West 8 Landscape Architecture, 1995

1. Adriaan Geuze, "Accelerating Darwin," in Gerrit Smienk (ed.), *Nederlandse landschapsarchitectuur, tussen traditie en experiment*, Amsterdam, 1993.
2. Rem Koolhaas, "Onze flat," in Jacques Lucan, *OMA Rem Koolhaas, Zurich/Munich*, 1991.
3. See note 1.
4. Cf. Koolhaas, *Ruimte voor een nieuwe tijd*, Rotterdam, 1993.
5. Rem Koolhaas, "Onze flat," in Jacques Lucan, *OMA Rem Koolhaas, Zurich/Munich*, 1991.
6. Rem Koolhaas, "Die erschreckende Schönheit des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts," in Jacques Lucan, op. cit.
7. Adriaan Geuze, *West 8, In Holland staat een huis*, Rotterdam, 1995.
8. Ibid.
9. Adriaan Geuze, "Wildernis" in Anne-Mie Devolder (ed.), *De Alexanderpolder, naar de mid-twintigste eeuw*, Bussum, 1993.
10. Lars Lerup, "Stim and Dross: Rethinking the Metropolis," in *boom* 25, 1994.
11. Ibid.
12. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York, 1994.
13. See note 10.
14. Adriaan Geuze, "Onze flat," in *Over Rotterdam*, Rotterdam, 1994 and *Taatselmatig Stimuleringsfonds* 1994, Rotterdam, 1995.
15. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community, Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading (Mass.), 1993.
16. See note 1.
17. Cf. Ludovic Ortner, "Amnestie for die gebaute Realiteit", *Architect* 1978; see also Bart Lootsma, "Amnestie voor de gebouwdroomgeving", *de Architect*, March 1993.

Stuck between buildings (or, a park is a hard place to be in New York).

The first time I saw Thomas Duarte Park I couldn't believe it. As I gazed at the particularly undistinguished triangle of hard pavement at the base of Thompson Street near Canal, I spied one lone tree, surrounded by a plywood bench (non-municipal issue). I thought of all the times I have crossed to the other side of the street to avoid some of the unsavory plots surrounded by chain link fencing we call parks. As a child growing up near Central Park, popular mythology and fantastic news coverage

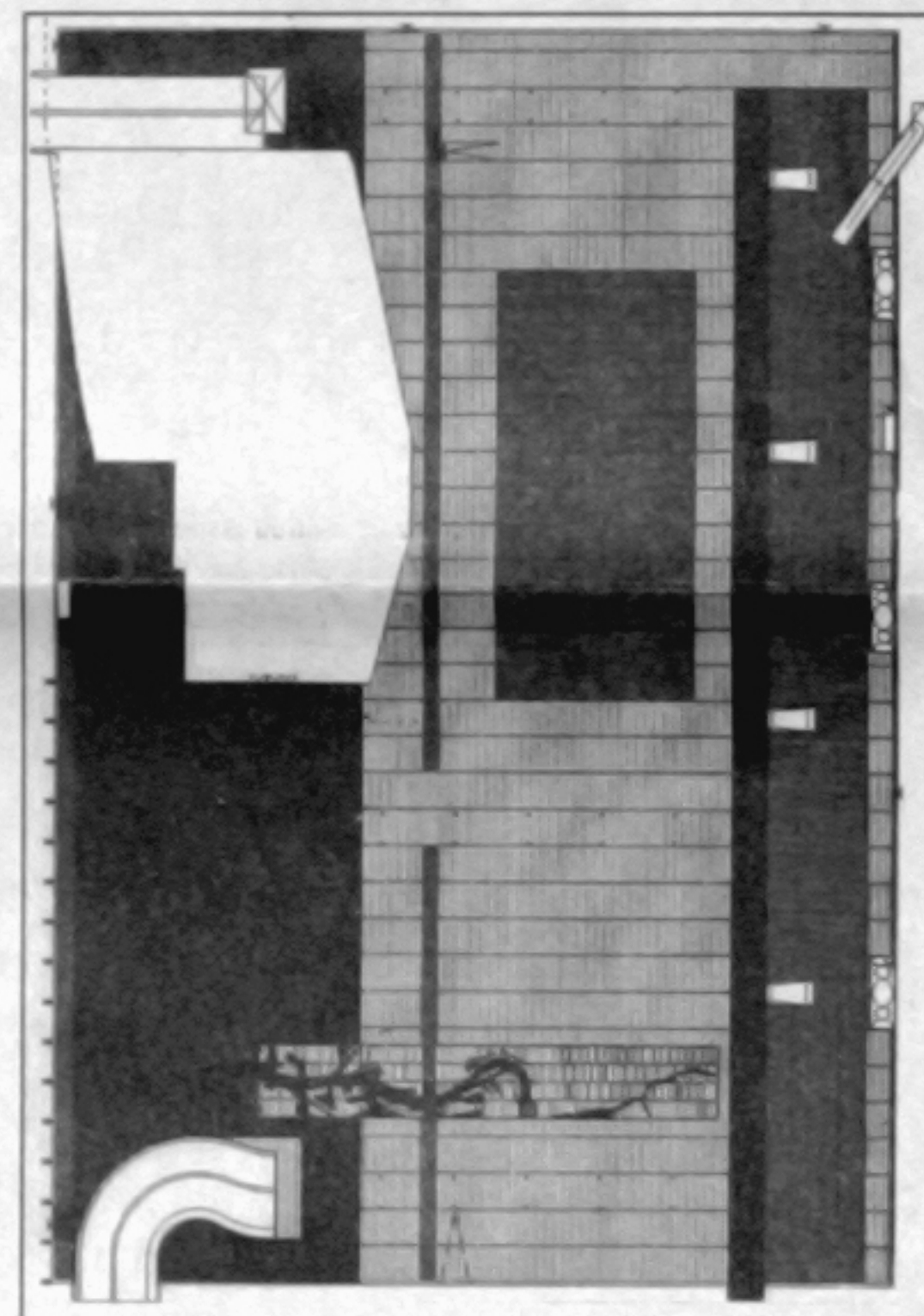


Schouwburgplein, Rotterdam, Design 1990-92, Construction 1995

warned us not to go near the park. Duarte Park, Father Demo Square, Charlton Plaza in lower Manhattan, Father Duffy Square in midtown, Verdi Square on the Upper West Side are among parks that come to mind when describing how far nature has receded from our daily life in the City. If indeed, as the American satirical monologist Spalding Gray decreed, Manhattan is an island facing America, that is, a cultural world apart, its attention to public spaces and parks are laden with both specific New York and generic American biases towards land use and leisure time in a capitalist system that allows the design of its environment to supply the desires of the wealth and power structures that dominate.

Topographically, Manhattan, its name meaning "island of mountains," is a curious constructed land form. Topped today by a second mountain range of steel, quarried stone and glass, its canyons dotted with uncoccupied spaces—rooftops, caves. It is a city that turns its back on natural resources as sources of beauty or pride, relegating its rivers, once an economic lifeblood to a distant point, cut off by highways and abandoned rail yards. It is also a city whose insistent verticals overpower the horizontal spaces between them.

If Venice is thought of for its canals, Paris and Florence for its rivers, San Francisco for its hills, this City's image is made up of a collection of object/monuments. New York has had a fair share of objects added to its collection, chiefly in the form of corporate structures and outward symbols of financial prowess. The City's essential credo of work, wealth and status has expressed itself in these objects that have been encouraged to display themselves. The lasting effect has less to do with the specific endeavors of the entity within, and more to do with the ethos, so we have recently witnessed the transfer of the building object from Pan Am to Met Life, or from AT&T to Sony. Thinking of this City's defining objects, one might list Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler Building, World Trade Center, Bus stations, hot dog stands, streets of unregulated designs, and Central Park. The Park, far more than a horizontal area without buildings, is an intrinsic part of New York City. How we deal with our parks and public spaces is emblematic of the failure to integrate open space and nature into the urban landscape. It also reflects an



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uneasy duality of this City which on the one hand promises democracy, open interaction and dynamism and on the other is dependent on the concentrations of wealth and power that control the environment. All the objects in our collection are subjected to rising property values and pressures of development such that we can destroy our old Penn Station, build a mall on top of our maritime history, or allow public space to be cast in the shadows of private development. Open space is the most imperiled, all too often sacrificed for short term gains that ultimately result in real losses.

Besides being objects of the City collection, parks can be and often are much more than static entities. They are sites for social integration, sites where the inevitable forces of the urban environment intersect the unpredictable life forces of humans, the ephemera of their actions and the altogether different life force of plant matter. The urban landscape is the baseline map of the City's culture, and not just gardens and wilderness, although these are parts of landscape. Society's relationship to its collective environment, where social and public values are communicated is expressed in this landscape.

Despite being called upon to perform this demanding task, parks in Manhattan have been subject to the vagaries of the economy, the subjects of political maneuvering, periods of transformation, attention and neglect. When Central Park, the jewel of the City parks system was built, it was during a period of both optimism and philanthropic plenty. As a pastoral contrast to the hard edges and congestion of the industrial metropolis, this altruistic creation was not necessarily the fulfillment of a democratic ideal in its late 19th century beginnings—these pleasure grounds were built with strict rules, dominated by formal entertainment and banning activities. Keep in mind also, that the huge land tract of Central Park, although desirable land today, was a swampy mass dotted with shanties, then at the extreme north of the mid-19th century city these grounds were hard to access for all but the wealthier classes, and the site was selected over a more valuable site on the East side.

Looking at our little shabby squares and traffic islands with benches, I wonder what people were thinking when parks were left out of the plans—from the 1811 grid plan with no provisions for parks to silver buildings in the 1980's edifying public space. New York is a rare city. Like London or Paris, it is a place that has evolved over centuries revealing its progress to those who come from all over to dwell within it, a place where those leaving are replaced by new inhabitants who patch up or improve what they can rather than moving away. For all its widespread magnetism, New York does not offer that much unless you can pay for it. The locked gates of the lovely Gramercy Park, a private square accessible only to residents of surrounding high-price real estate are worlds apart from the clamor of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on the median strip of heavily trafficked avenues on the Lower East Side. Our public parks have become voids in between the arrangement of our buildings. Something we cross through on our way to somewhere else.

With a defining inescapable street life, solitude, isolation, simplicity, conformity are not among New York's attributes and their counterparts can be as exhausting as well as exhilarating. Contemporary housing and employment shortages compound the challenges which were exacerbated in the 1970's by widespread cutbacks of mental health facilities and the conversions of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels that provided inexpensive housing into luxury condominiums, sending thousands onto the streets. While these stresses mount, a common response is to turn away from the public park and retreat to private clubs, gyms, corporate and hotel lobbies. Many parks have become the last resort of those who have no other options. Left to the financially resource-less and politically under-represented our parks are victims of neglect from the market system they play no role in. There are notable exceptions in the form of individual initiatives (Adam Purple's late-garden on the Lower East Side), Operation Greenthumb and Green Guerrillas community reclamation, the vigilance and thoughtfulness of private non-profits such as The Municipal Art Society, The Central Park Conservancy, Project for Public Spaces, individuals who have led communities including Anthony Dapollito and Jane Jacobs, and provisional allotment gardens that provide options beyond what is dealt us.

In this hand, public spaces have been dealt the cast-offs—the places between buildings, the triangular wedges of raised pavement between avenues, frequently land too insubstantial to build on. New York City's public spaces are more the resultants of the vicissitudes of the real estate market and political partnerships with developers than the workings of nature, planning, society or art. Public space and park development in this City, with its supposedly free access to all has developed its open spaces alongside the needs of the market economy, complete with ruling class preferences, and top down decisions.

In our history, developers have routinely received concessions. The post-WWII era offered developer-friendly building regulations in exchange for alleged contributions to the public space, neutralizing arts and culture initiatives by allowing them to be co-opted by capital. Incorporating a public plaza, building owners could build bigger—each square foot of plaza gained 10 square feet of office space. Such advantage was taken of this ratio, that between 1961 and 1973, more plaza space was created in New York City than in all other cities combined, while the buildings that towered above them obliterated most of the sunlight they needed to allow plants to grow or to invite people to gather. The City fiscal collapse of the 1970's saw legislation even more favorable to developers, deciding rules on a case by case basis. Developers were able to hire the most expensive legal assistance who handily defeated the City's defenders and Community Boards. Plazas and atria built as meager concessions were poorly maintained if ever installed, in perpetual shadow, and rarely truly open to the public. Real losses in public space and the City were sacrificed for imaginary gains. Subsequent conciliatory efforts to beautify streets, or plant trees could not repair the damage done by a lack of truly regulatory zoning, land use reform, and putting limits on the impact of private capital.

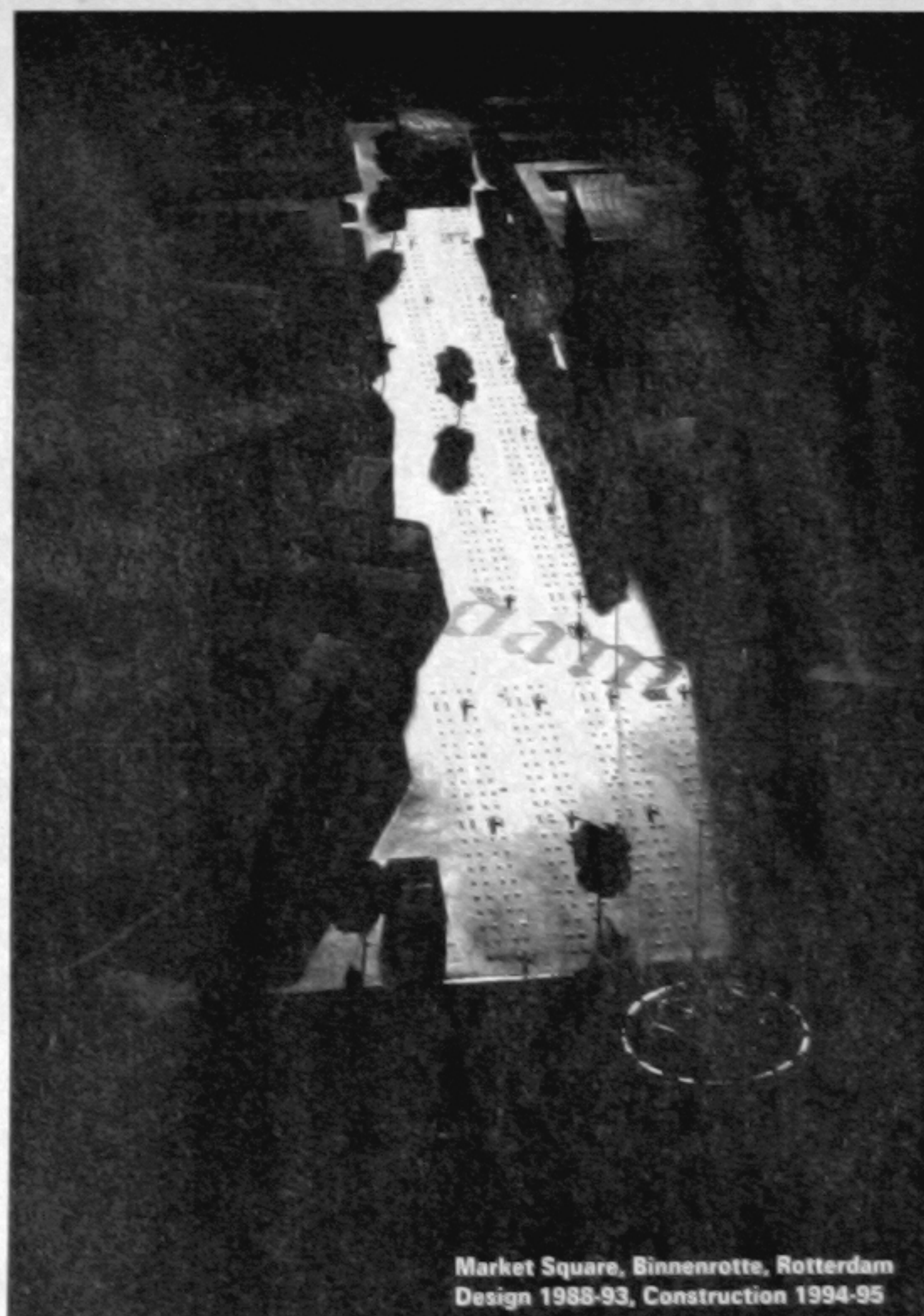
Physically marginal, the park's place within our Protestant work ethic has and continues to be hard to reconcile. As places where people seemingly sit, relax, think—parks acknowledge the need for play, rest, spontaneity, and as such, are seen as existing for marginal activities between productive pursuits—early morning jogs, weekend walks or lunch hours are tolerated, but are perhaps seen more as necessities than essentials. Plants and gardens are frequently seen as interludes of the pursuits of hobbyists, retirees, the spaces of Sunday landscape painting. Other places for nature: as gimmick, sculpted into goofy forms for topiary, indoor geometric patterns. As scare tactics: the Eco-fascists or Earth Firsters overly preaching tides. As marginal, powerless or alternative: The continually threatened work on vacant lots, or the "squatter" status of community groups. The expense of maintaining parks and plantings, like supporting the arts is deemed a luxury, or of serving only a small number, an expense that can be foregone

when push comes to shove.

Not to say that parks have not ever pushed back—the question is more who is pushing who to do what. We need a new ideology for parks and public space, for a dynamic public. An ideology less dependent on sloppy seconds, and one that acknowledges their place as significant cultural objects along with the Public Library as well as the branch libraries, the Metropolitan Museum and Mott Street. Turn of the century guardians of cultural ideals created their parks as they created their museums—mechanisms to describe values and morals dominated by late-Victorian ideals and images left over from the landscape paintings of the 18th century that had informed the new field of landscape architecture. Subsequent reform efforts extended park land to City neighborhoods, but in a mechanistic manner that did not respond directly to the needs of its site. Monolithic Parks Commissioner Robert Moses developed parks as recreational outlets that conformed to the development and progress strategy, imposing functions on the public. In a cost-effectiveness-before-all-program, materials were chosen for lowest maintenance costs, and imperviousness to vandalism, so that the democratic aspects of parks and nature were diminished even further by strict programming and landscaping, effectively relegating natural elements of landscape work and individual choices to invisibility.

Thomas Hoving, Parks Commissioner during Mayor John Lindsay's first administration in the late 1960's promoted what became known as "the open space movement" that did develop a lot of public parks by taking what was left over, occupying the opposites of architecture by occupying that which was not built up. The strengths of this policy lay in an economy of availability, operating with an urban resourcefulness that has come to be associated with environmentalism. Open space promised a fluidity in function by offering simply a space—there were no program limits defined by park structure. Open space design was the era of the adventure playground, where the park was open to the passers-by on the sidewalk and street acknowledging the excitement of the city. Park possibilities were endless—vacant lots, waterfronts, underuses of freeways and bridges. They still could be—why not put a park in a small open lot instead of granting a parking lot an operating permit? Think of parks as a roving possibility wherever you go. By that notion, there could be a mobile unit designated to occupy spaces with parks. Think of it when passing a demolition site.

When I look at a little corner surrounded by a high fence, complete with cracking asphalt and overflowing garbage, or try and sit in a downtown plaza whose ledges are lined with serrated teeth, I think something is wrong here. Parks and their elements should be visible—not forcibly as imposing land tracts, but as valued elements in the landscape. Parks and their creators can provide democratic situations, a place for everyone, a place they can feel a part of, a place they can enhance with their presence or efforts—often the opposite of a building whose architect/designer who sees the entirety of their projects in their minds. Landscape architects and community



Market Square, Binnenrotte, Rotterdam Design 1988-93, Construction 1994-95

designers should acknowledge users and other life forces as integral to their designs and as strong elements to work with. More than that, planning standards and commissions need to view parks as a mandate not an option. With that in mind, New York City can dust off some of the park objects in its collection whose sheen has worn off, and maybe make some new acquisitions.

Nicholas Tobler
April, 1996